Endowed Presbyterian Churches Conference

Worship Service

Saturday, October 5, 1991, 8:30 a.m.

THE VALUE OF OUR COMMITMENTS

John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL

Matthew 25:14-30

> "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance."
> [Matthew 25:29a]

The subject is not money but responsibility. The sentence could read, "to all who have much responsibility, more will be given, and they will have an abundance of responsibilities." They will also be very busy, Jesus might have added... For it is the iron law of voluntary organizations, is it not? Volunteer once, and you're caught; do a good job and your reward is another, bigger job. Open your mouth and offer an opinion on how the task might be accomplished, and you will be asked to do it; chair the committee, raise the money, organize the dinner, take out the trash - whatever. "Those who have, get more..." Responsibility. What better example than us?... a beautiful fall Saturday morning when most of the world is playing golf, taking walks, enjoying coffee and paper, sleeping in - and here we are, at a church meeting!

Henry Copeland, President of the College of Wooster, began a fine convocation address on the topic by retelling Aesop's Fable, "Belling the Cat."

The mice lived in a state of perpetual fear because of the constant menace which hovered over their very existence. So they held a general meeting to discuss what measures they might take to outwit the enemy, the Cat.

A young mouse rose to speak:

> "You will all agree that our chief danger consists in the sly and treacherous manner in which the enemy approaches us. Now, if we could receive some signal of her approach, we could easily escape from her. I venture, therefore, to propose that a small bell be procured and attached by a

ribbon around the neck of the cat. By this means we should always know when she was about and could easily retire while she was in the neighborhood."

"This proposal was met with general applause."

What a wonderful idea - brilliant - creative! But there is an unhappy ending.

A wise old mouse got up and said: "That is all very well, but who is to bell the Cat?"

Nobody said a word. No one was willing to be responsible, to assume the very real risks involved in doing what needed to be done.

President Copeland's point, which got my attention, was that the very notion of responsibility has not fared well in our society. Rather, the "Me Decade," the "New Narcissism," told us we were entitled not to responsibility but to comfortability. "Do yourself a favor; take care of yourself; be your own best friend; you deserve a break today" became the litanies by which we live, a kind of soothing moral narcotic. The flip side of which is "the politics of blame," i.e. whatever is going wrong must be somebody else's fault: big government, big business, big labor, big education. "They" are making a mess of things. It's all "their" fault: General Assembly staff in Louisville, church bureaucrats, Angela Davis, liberals, conservatives, evangelicals, social activists, and now, John Carey and the members of the Task Force on Human Sexuality.

The result of this combination of "entitlement thinking" and "the politics of blame" is that individuals maintain a safe distance between themselves and their institutions, an intentional avoidance of the kind of public and personal responsibility upon which those institutions are absolutely dependent: the college, museum, symphony orchestra, hospital, church.

Change the world? Who Me? I suppose there aren't many of us who, deep in our heart of hearts, would not like to, if not change the course of history, at least to make a difference - in some way to contribute something to the well-being of the planet and the human enterprise. And I don't suppose there are many of us who have not, over the years, come to terms with the reality that we can't do very much. We are not Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King or Jonas Salk or Albert Schweitzer. We are simply who we are, and it takes most of our time and energy and strength just keeping body and soul together. I don't suppose there are many of us who have not despaired just a bit about our impotence and in that despair retreated from a sense of responsibility, cultivated a bit of that distance from our institutions, "What, after all," we reason, "can I possibly do?"

And in that tiny dynamic, which does not happen one day once-and-for-all, but is a process, a slow retreat over the years, in that small dynamic there is a fatal moral flaw.

"The sin of respectable people," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "is running from responsibility." You know Bonhoeffer's story - the German pastor who took a public stand against Naziism, eventually cast his lot with the resistance and joined with an assassination attempt against Adolph Hitler, was arrested in 1943 and executed in 1945 just before the end of the war. Before he was a martyr, Bonhoeffer was an academician, a distinguished scholar. His academic speciality was Ethics.

And for him, the basis of Christian ethics was responsibility. Bonhoeffer, the ethics scholar, taught that "personal experience of God's judgment and grace also included consciousness of a larger humanity to which we belong."

That tragic 20th century divorce between private and public discipleship, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified, is ironically seen best in the people who found it possible to go to church on Sunday morning and on Monday go to work in their jobs in a concentration camp where thousands of people were being gassed. One of his biographers put it this way: "Bonhoeffer's fundamental view of ethics was that a Christian must accept responsibility as a citizen of this world where God has placed him/her." [See Life Together, John W. Doberstein, p. 7-13]

Do you ever wonder what you would have done? I do... and I conclude that we might, in a moment of impulsive heroism, have done the right thing. But what made Bonhoeffer a martyr was not a moment of impulsive heroism, but a carefully reasoned theological position. He concluded that believing in Jesus made him a responsible citizen of this world.

Bonhoeffer's proposal - that Christian discipleship begins with responsible citizenship - is, I would propose, terribly important today, even more so than it was fifty years ago.

The topic of a responsible sexual ethic will not go away, unfortunately. If we know anything about the topic, it is that articulating the traditional moral maxims about sex may make us feel good, but will have absolutely no impact on the way people behave sexually. And, in fact, because of religion's refusal to be responsible, it may contribute - indeed does contribute - to an epidemic of unwanted pregnancies, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, child abuse and abandonment.

The kind of society we want to be, the kind of nation, continues to be before us and is determined in the political arena as representatives struggle with the hard realities of money and national defense and education and health care.

The people who are writing the best theology today are pleading for a renewal of morality, not in the traditional sense of saying "no" to immorality, but an ethic of responsibility for the life of the whole world, responsibility for the existence of the planet, "the integrity of creation," the World Council of Churches called it, the welfare of all people, the well-being of the city, the life of the church.

It is the nature of the topic to be difficult and controversial. "Belling the cat" is very risky business. To make matters worse there is a long and venerable tradition in this country that discipleship is a private matter, that religious faith is a matter between God and me and that there is and should be no connection between personal faith and public political behavior.

Bonhoeffer would disagree with that. So would the one who said "to all those who have, more will be given" and meant "responsibility."

It was a moving and great moment when Vaclav Havel, poet, political prisoner, now President of Czechoslovakia, addressed the United States Congress. He said:

> The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart... in human responsibility..." (sounds like secular humanism, but listen!) "The only backbone to our actions, if they are to be moral - is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my firm, my country, my success - responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged." [See "Belling the Cat," Henry Copeland, The Wooster Review]

And so the matter rests finally in your heart and mine. No matter who you are - CEO of a major corporation, or simply the CEO of your own life - God's love for you and the world translates into responsibility. In Jesus Christ, God calls you to live fully in the world, to passionately love it, to be responsible for it. It is our burden... but it is also our glory.

Jesus said:

> "To all those who have,
> more will be given, and
> they will have an abundance."